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ABSTRACT

Testing as a means of documenting progress has risen to prominence in the climate of educational crisis which followed the publication of "A Nation At Risk." New developments in testing will determine how some of the current problems now facing postsecondary education are resolved. Among these problems are the following: lack of agreement on what constitutes college-level work, evidenced by the use of more than 70 different tests in student placement and wide variations in cut-off scores; recognition of the importance of correct student placement in facilitating success; increasing proportions of part-time adult students; widely varying standards in high school grades, which have rendered the measure unreliable for college entrance; adult illiteracy in a labor market that requires fewer and fewer unskilled workers; and increased pressures to demonstrate accountability. These problems can be addressed in the following ways: (1) the creation of an "all one learning system," which will standardize what constitutes college-level work in reading, communications, and mathematics; (2) the joint use of diagnostic and placement tests, and the careful monitoring of cut-scores; (3) more accurate assessment of prior learning; (4) the use of a combination of placement, diagnostic, aptitude, and vocational tests to assess high school students' prior learning; (5) participation in the National Literacy Project and the Adult Basic Literacy Education; (6) pre- and post-matriculation competency testing as a means of demonstrating accountability to both colleges/universities and employers. A bibliography is included. (UCM)

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Student Development in 1990
New Developments in Testing

by

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May 25, 1987

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STUDENT DEVELOPMENT IN 1990

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN TESTING
May 27,1987

With the publication of A Nation At Risk previewing pitfalls to come and "excellence " becoming the goal of every college department, testing to document progress has risen to prominence in this climate of educational crisis. New developments in testing/assessment will determine how we solve some of the current problems now facing the college system.

PROBLEMS:

1. Lack of agreement about what constitutes college level work

A recent report by Southern Regional Education Board depicts the wide range of standards accepted for entrance into college level courses. Some colleges accept 7th grade reading level while others demand 13th grade level; one college requires 14th percentile on math while another requires 94th percentile before allowing college-level courses.

What is the difference between placement and admissions requirements? Many colleges, including CPCC, have "open admissions" which means anyone above 16 in age may attend. However, students must have certain skills before entering college level courses. Placement tests determine which students may register for college level communications, English, reading and mathematics. Students with basic skills deficiencies should take developmental/remedial courses before entering college level courses (college credit is not given for developmental courses).

Southern Regional Education Board reports that about 100 different combinations of 70 different tests are used in placement for reading, writing, and mathematics. Cut-scores vary from 1st percentile to 66th percentile on some tests indicating a lack of standards for college level work. For example, this slide shows three well-known tests and the wide range of cut-scores used for acceptance into college level courses. The June 24, 1987 Chronicle of Higher Education quotes from a SREB report: "Faculty have been faced with instructing in the same class students who read at the 8th grade level and others who read at the 12th grade level....neither student nor faculty has had the opportunity to succeed." A survey in 1981 in N.C. also found large numbers of tests and varied cut-scores used for placement within that state.

2. Recognizing the importance of correct placement.

The importance of correct placement is now recognized by marketing and "success in college" groups (Rounds and Anderson, 84-85). The student placed in a class above his ability probably will not be successful, will not remain in school, will not return for other courses and will not recommend the college to other possible students. Correct placement is essential. Valid tests and carefully set cut-scores help.

3. Awareness of who is today's college student

Adults returning to complete education or to retrain constitute a large part of today's college population. The American Council on Education (spring, 1987) reported that the adult learners are the fastest growing segment of college students and that by 1990, the majority of enrolled college students will be part-time adult learners. Since 1980, the 30-34 year old group has increased by 17% and is now the largest age group in the country. At the same time, the 15-19 group shrank by 12% (Higher Education Advocate, May 15, 1987). At CPCC, the average student is 31 years old.

4. Widely varying standards

Widely varying standards in high school grades has rendered this time-honored gage of student work unreliable for college entrance. Roueche, Baker and Roueche (1987) reported that high school grade point averages are no longer indicative of student preparedness for college. Therefore, colleges must use entry level testing to determine student skills. Copperman (1978) recognized the wide variations in secondary school grading and found this a big problem is comparing student potential.

5. Adult illiteracy

Adult illiteracy in the U.S. is shocking. Corporations recognize that workers need education and basic skills to handle jobs such as painting, maintenance, and repair. Dr. Robert McCabe, President of Miami-Dade, (AACJC Convention, Dallas, 1987) stated that immediately after World War II, 80% of jobs required unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Today 20% of jobs require this type worker. In the May, 1987, Phi Delta Kappan, David Kearns, CEO of Xerox, is quoted as saying: "We need workers who can adjust to change, who can absorb new ideas and share them easily with others. In short, we need people who have learned how to learn (p. 711)."

Last, but not least, we want to know we're doing the most accurate, professional job in testing and assessment possible.

6. How to demonstrate accountability

Everyone is facing accountability - students, instructors, colleges, business. Politicians want to know what they're getting for tax dollars. Business wants to know how well colleges train students. Students want to know what they can gain by attending college. Administrators want to know which instructors are most competent.

Solutions:

1. (problem = lack of agreement for college level work)

Goals of the ACE's Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials focus around the theme "all one learning system" in which students of all ages and varied skills plug into a national system at their level and continue until their educational goal is met. In our national defense establishment this is called the Total Force concept (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard) of working together to optomize effectiveness. In education, "all one learning system" will require standardization of what constitutes college level work including reading, communications and mathematics. I challenge you to consider the idea "all one learning system" on the institutional level.

2. (problem = correct placement)

Correct placement impacts on many facets of the college. By using valid placement instruments and carefully monitoring cut-scores, accurate placement should be the rule. Diagnostic tests should complement placement tests in order to identify areas of weakness. Diagnostic tests can help the students and instructors pinpoint the specific areas that need further development for the most effective student learning.

3. (problem = who is today's student)

Assessment of prior learning is becoming more important. Many adults have on-the-job experiences that are useful. Colleges such as Johnson County C. C. and Dundalk C. C. are already making extensive use of these assessments. ACE and The military have been recommending awarding credit for military service learning experiences for years. This is an ever enlarging, on-going process with business and industry experiences, too. If students have basic skills, they should be able to take advantage of previous quality learning even though it did not take place in a traditional classroom.

GED testing allows some students to complete requirements for adult high school diploma. In North Carolina, 20% of high school credentials are issued through the community college system's GED program.

Business is using more testing than ever. Because of retraining demands, many companies must quickly assess the abilities of workers to make decisions about funds and time allotment for retraining. Nell Eurich in Corporate Classrooms states that not counting salaries and wages, corporations probably spent about $60 billion on education in 81-82 which was the estimated total amount spent by public and private universities and four-year colleges.

Demand for aptitude and vocational assessment is growing. Younger ages are being contacted. Jr. High students are being encouraged to plan ahead and look at new options.

4. (problem = varying standards)

Entry level testing becomes more important since high school grades are generally not reliable indicators of student success. Tests combined with other evaluations provide some reference for entry decisions. Placement, diagnostic, aptitude, vocational and assessment of prior learning may be needed in various combinations to help a student understand his or her abilities and interests

5. (problem = illiteracy)

The National Literacy Project has brought the problem of illiteracy to the public's attention with special TV promotions, public service announcements and phone numbers to call for additional information. With 23 million Americans illiterate, our national and competitive status is threatened.

The Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) is working on better methods of testing adults with limited skills. CPCC is currently using a FIPSE grant to develop computer software for use with this program.

6 (problem = accountability)

Some states, such as Florida (CLAST), Georgia, South Dakota and Tennessee are using competency tests (reported by Boyer et al, 1987, in the AAHE Bulletin). New Jersey, with 10 years of New Jersey Basic Skills Testing data, has a clear picture of entering college freshmen. Some colleges are giving competency tests for graduates to assure employers that graduates in a particular field are well qualified in that field. Northeast Missouri State University gives every graduate a competency test and they have more applicants than they can accept (see Ordovensky, 1987). Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, N.C., will begin competency testing with the class of 1988 in the hopes it will help ensure academic quality and thus ensure survival of the school. Interest in the area of state wide assessment is mounting. About 1/3 of the states expect some action toward basic skills tests for entering freshmen. California will return to matriculation in fall, 1988 and all students will have orientation, placement tests and participate in a tracking system for accountability. Cole (1984) cautions: "We must respond with careful considerations of appropriate test use in meeting accountability demands and with serious study of the question of what educational basics students will need in the future (p. 8)."

Professional organizations are using more certification exams. All areas of nursing such as intravenus theropy, critical care, medical records and other have special qualifying exams. Insurance, real estate, Life Management Institute, business communicators, food protection, pension actuaries and the Federal Aviation Administration have certification exams. All of these are establishing accountability.

SUMMARY:

The computer has opened many new doors for testing applications. Self test, immediate scoring, on demand testing, touch screens for manual dexterity tests and hands-on applications in the technological areas have brought testing into a new day.

Standard tests such as ASVAB, GATB and GED are being computerized for easy use and fast reporting. New tests are being developed to take advantage of computer capabilities. Educational Testing Service has been a leader in using computers for administration of tests. Their Computerized Placement Test (CPT), SIGI, and JOBTAP II are in use and their Diagnostic Assessment Program (DAP) is developing. We will see a video on Item Response Theory, CPT, and DAP.

No other area of Student Development will have a greater challenge or a more significant impact on student learning and professional accountability than testing services and the information provided. To accept this challenge, a national organization of professional testing personnel could work toward better distribution of information, more standardization of cut-scores and acceptable levels of competency, as well as offer a clearing house for new ideas and suggestions.

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